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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Phobia

What is a phobia?

A phobia is something a person fears to the point that they feel they have to change how they behave. One type of phobia, called *specific phobia*, can involve fear of an object (like an elevator) or a situation (like public speaking) that poses little or no danger. Phobias can also involve fear of being embarrassed, looked at, or made fun of in social or work situations. These are called *social phobias*. With both of these phobias, the fear is extreme and hard to control. Without treatment, phobias can last many years and affect a person's career, relationships, and daily life activities. Both specific and social phobias are types of *anxiety disorders*.

It's important to know that when a person has a specific or social phobia, it's not her or his fault. And, it's not something a person can just "snap out of." No one knows for sure what causes phobias.

What are specific phobias and what are the symptoms?

Specific phobias are common – they strike 1 out of every 10 Americans. Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from this illness. Starting in the teenage and adult years, they may run in families. They begin suddenly and tend to last longer than childhood phobias (like being afraid of the dark).

When a person has a specific phobia, they have an intense fear of something that poses little or no real danger. Because there is no or little danger, a person's fear is not based on reality (called *irrational fear*). Some of the more common specific phobias involve fear of closed-in places, heights, escalators, elevators, tunnels, highway driving, bridges, water, flying, dogs, and injuries involving blood. And, a specific phobia often makes no sense. For instance, you may be able to jump out of airplanes with ease but not be able to go above the 4th floor of an office building. Most people with these phobias know that they don't make sense. But, facing their fear, or even thinking about it, can bring on a panic attack or severe anxiety.

Specific phobias can be treated, helping a person have a full and healthy life. But, when the object of the fear is easy to avoid, a person may decide to do so rather than get treatment. Not getting treatment, though, can cause a person to make decisions that will affect their personal life and limit their career. Go to the question on how are phobias treated for more information.

What are social phobias and what are the symptoms?

Social phobia involves feeling very self-conscious in everyday social situations. It is more than just being shy or nervous, and can cause extreme anxiety. A person can feel afraid and uncomfortable when around other people. It may be hard to be at work or school, when you have to interact with others. While many people with these phobias know that their fear may be extreme, they are unable to control it. They often worry for days or weeks in advance of a situation they are dreading. This illness most often starts in childhood or the teenage years, and may run in families. Women are just as likely as men to develop

social phobia. Other anxiety disorders or depression often go hand-in-hand with this phobia. Some people also turn to alcohol or drugs for relief.

Symptoms include:

- Intense fear that you will do or say something and embarrass yourself in front of other people.
- Always being afraid of making a mistake and being watched and judged by other people.
- Avoiding doing things you want to or speaking to people because you fear being embarrassed.
- Worrying for days or weeks before you have to meet new people.
- Blushing, sweating a lot, trembling, nausea, or feeling like you have to throw up before and during an event where you are with new people.
- Staying away from social situations such as school events and making speeches.
- Drinking alcohol to make your fears go away.

People who have social phobias most often know that their fears don't make sense. But, even if they manage to face what they fear, they can still feel anxious and uncomfortable. Social phobias can be treated, helping a person have a full and healthy life. Not getting treatment can cause a person to make decisions that will affect their personal life. Go to the question on how are phobias treated for more information.

What should I do if I think I have a phobia?

If you think you may have symptoms of a specific or social phobia, a visit to your doctor is the best place to start. Your doctor will perform a careful exam to figure out whether your symptoms are really due to this illness, or if you have another anxiety disorder or problem.

Sometimes a person can feel awkward talking to a health care provider about phobias. They may blame themselves, think their condition is not serious, or feel embarrassed. Keep in mind that this illness can be treated. Be aware that all anxiety disorders are not treated the same.

The next step your doctor may suggest is a visit with a mental health professional. This includes psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and counselors. It is best to look for a professional who has special training in cognitive-behavioral and/or behavioral therapy. Try to find someone who is open to the use of medications, should they be needed. And if they are not a medical doctor, be sure they work with one so medication can be prescribed. Keep in mind that when you start taking medicine, it may not start working right away. You need to give your body a few weeks to get used to the medicine. Then, you and your doctor can decide if it's working.

You can get free information about anxiety disorders from the National Institute of Mental Health. Call toll free 1-88-88-ANXIETY.

It's very important that you feel comfortable with your treatment. If this is not the case, seek help elsewhere. If you've been taking medication, don't stop it all of a sudden. These drugs need to be tapered off slowly, under the care of your doctor. Talk with your doctor about how to stop the medication you're taking.

How are phobias treated?

Phobias are a type of anxiety disorder, the most common of all the mental disorders. Many people misunderstand these disorders and think people should be able to overcome the symptoms by sheer willpower. But, the symptoms can't be willed or wished away. There are treatments, developed through research, that work well for these disorders.

Anxiety disorders are treated in two ways – with medication and with certain types of psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk therapy”). Sometimes only one treatment is used or both treatments are combined. If you have an anxiety disorder, talk with your doctor about what will work best for you. If you do choose psychotherapy, make sure the therapist is able to provide you with medication, if needed.

A number of drugs used for treating depression, called *antidepressants*, have been found to help with anxiety disorders as well. *Monoamine oxidase inhibitors* (MAOIs) are used, along with the newer selective *serotonin reuptake inhibitors* (SSRIs). Other medicines include anti-anxiety drugs called *benzodiazepines* and *beta-blockers*.

Treatment with psychotherapy includes *cognitive-behavioral therapy* (CBT) and *behavioral therapy*. In CBT, the goal is to change how a person thinks about, and then reacts to, a situation that makes them anxious or fearful. In behavioral therapy, the focus is on changing how a person reacts to a situation. CBT or behavioral therapy most often lasts for 12 weeks. It can be group or individual therapy. With phobias, a type of CBT called *desensitization* or *exposure therapy* is sometimes used. This involves slowly exposing the person to what frightens them until the fear begins to fade. Relaxation and breathing exercises can also help reduce anxiety symptoms. Some studies have shown that the benefits of CBT or behavioral therapy last longer than do those of medications for people with phobias.

Keep in mind that it can be a challenge to find the right treatment for an anxiety disorder. But, if one treatment doesn't work, the odds are good that another one will. Your doctor and therapist will work together to help you find the best approach. New treatments are being developed through ongoing research. So, don't give up hope. If you have recovered from an anxiety disorder and it comes back at a later date, don't think that you've failed. You can be treated again. And, the skills you learned dealing with the disorder the first time can help you in coping with it again.

What can I do to help myself if I have a phobia?

Many people find it helps to join a support group because they can share their problems and successes with others who are going through the same thing. While it doesn't take the place of mental health care, talking with trusted friends or a member of your faith community can also be very helpful. Family members can play an important role in a person's treatment by offering support. Learning how to manage stress will help you to stay calm and focused. Research suggests that aerobic exercise (like jogging, bicycling and swimming) may be of value as well. Other studies have found that caffeine, illegal

drugs, and some over-the-counter cold medicines can worsen the symptoms of these disorders. Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter medicines.

What is the latest research on anxiety disorders?

The National Institute of Mental Health supports research into the causes, prevention, and treatment of anxiety disorders and other mental illnesses. Studies are ongoing for how family background (genetics) and life experience puts a person at risk for these disorders. New drugs are being tested in clinical trials, as well as therapy approaches. For information on clinical trials, go to the NIMH web site <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/studies/index.cfm> and the National Library of Medicine's clinical trials database at <http://www.clinicaltrials.gov>.

For more information...

You can find out more about phobias and anxiety disorders, and their treatments by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center at (800) 994-9662 or one of the following organizations:

National Institute of Mental Health

Phone Number(s): (301) 443-4513 or (301) 443-8431

Internet Address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

National Mental Health Information Center, SAMHSA, HHS

Phone Number(s): (800) 789-2647

Internet Address: <http://www.mentalhealth.org>

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

Phone Number(s): (800) 553-4539

Internet Address: <http://www.mhselfhelp.org>

National Mental Health Association

Phone Number(s): (800) 969-6642

Internet Address: <http://www.nmha.org>

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

Phone Number(s): (800) 950-6264

Internet Address: <http://www.nami.org>

This FAQ was adapted from anxiety disorder fact sheets of the National Institute of Mental Health.

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*This FAQ was reviewed by Victoria Hendrick, M.D., of the University of California, Los Angeles.
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